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DAVOS IN WINTER.
The home of John Addington Symonds.

THE SWISS PEOPLE AND THEIR COUNTRY

IN Switzerland, above all other lands of Europe, is the greatness of Nature manifest. But not even the Alps can overshadow the story of her people. The Swiss are more interesting even than Switzerland. To a very remarkable extent the history of Switzerland has affected the general current of European history, partly through the courage of the mercenary soldiers that the Alpine communities sent abroad in olden times, partly because always Switzerland has provided a house of refuge for political exiles from other countries. The deeds of her people cannot but be interesting in every land where European civilisation rules. They have the interest not only of their essential heroism but of their near relation to the development of other countries.

To get a fair impression of Switzerland and the Swiss at the outset, it seems to be advisable to clear away a common misconception of mountain ranges as being the nurses inevitably of heroic human natures. The Swiss have been absurdly over-praised by some, largely because of the fallacy that a mountain people must have all the virtues. They have been unfairly over-blamed by others, who seem to have started with a preconceived idea of an impossibly heroic people and to have been soured when they found unreasonable illusions shattered. "The Swiss are stubborn, devoid of all generous sentiment, not generous nor humane," said Ruskin. There spoke the disappointed sentimentalist.

Obviously he approached the Swiss from the fallacious "Alpine character" point of view, and vainly expected them to live up to the super-heroic idea he had formed of the sort of people who ought to inhabit the slopes of such magnificent mountains. Voltaire, de Staël, Hugo, Dumas, all abuse the Swiss. They demanded of them—carried away by that idea of the mountains enduing people with virtues—an impossible standard, and kicked at them for not living up to it, as a Chinaman kicks his joss when it does not bring rain under impossible wind conditions.

To inhabit a mountain country is, if all the facts are taken into account, a handicap rather than an advantage to a race. In the earlier stages of civilisation the mountains have imposed upon them the duty of sheltering alike fleeing patriots and fleeing criminals: and the criminals are usually the more numerous. In later stages mountains interfere greatly with the development of the machinery of civilisation. Always, too, mountain air sharpens the appetite rather than the wits, and there are some diseases attacking particularly the brain which are almost peculiar to mountain districts.

The Swiss, then, have to be considered justly rather in the light of a handicapped than of a favoured people. Their one favouring national circumstance is that their central position in regard to the great plains of Europe

has put them in the track of all the chief currents of civilisation. What they have managed to effect in spite of the handicap of their mountains is one of the marvellous stories of the human race; and to the mountains they owe in the main their sense of national unity. They served as the bond of a common misfortune.

To her lakes rather than to her mountains Switzerland owed the beginnings of civilisation. Nowadays, as the curtains of mist are rolled away from the past by geologist and anthropologist, we are coming to a clearer idea of the origins of this wonderful civilisation of ours, which makes the common routine of a plain citizen today more full of wonders than any legend told of an ancient god. Science, fossicking in the tunnels of the excavators and scanning closely what they bring up to the surface light, is inclined now to tell us that the beginnings of organised community life were on the lake shores of some ancient age.

The idea would be reasonable in theory even if it had no facts to support it. A lake means shelter, water, fish: it suggests—in this unlike a river—settling down. In a lake the fish teem thick and become big and fat and slothful. (Note how the little fighting trout of the rapid streams grow to the big, stupid, inert things of the New Zealand lakes, fish that come and ask to be caught, fish that a family can feed upon.) It was natural that a lake should stimulate into activity those microbes of civilisation which had infected the primitive nomads.

And so it was with Switzerland; it has been made clear by scientists that every Swiss lake was a centre for a thick

population in the later Stone Age and the Bronze Age. The first important discoveries regarding these Swiss lake-dwellers were made in 1853, when the waters of Zurich lake sank so low that a stretch of land was laid bare along the shores. The people of Meilen, twelve miles from Zurich, took advantage of this to carry out some public works, and during the operations the workmen encountered obstacles, which proved to be wooden piles. These piles, the tops of which were but a few inches below the surface of the mud, were found to be planted in rows and squares, in great number. There were picked out of the mud bones, antlers, weapons and implements of various kinds. Dr. Ferdinand Keller was sent from Zurich to examine the workings, and he pronounced them to be the site of a lake settlement, probably of some very ancient Celtic tribe. Many marks of a prehistoric occupation had been found before 1853, but no traces of dwellings. The discovery caused a sensation, and gave a great impulse to archæological studies. Dr Keller called these early settlers Pfahl-bauer, or pile-builders. Since then over two hundred of these villages have been discovered—on the shores of the lakes of Constance, Leman, Zurich, Neuchâtel, Bienne, Morat, and other smaller lakes, and on rivers and swampy spots which had once been lakes. The strictly Alpine lakes, however, with their steep inaccessible banks, show no trace of these settlements.

From these early Swiss lake-dwellers through the Helvetian, Teutonic and French periods of invasion and influence we come to the Swiss people of today who preserve that element of the

paradoxical which in the Middle Ages produced an Arnold Winkelried, courageous to gather the spears of a foe into his bosom for the sake of his country, and thousands of other heroes willing to give almost as great service to any cause for the sake of steady pay. The Switzer of the twentieth century is intensely patriotic, and to keep his country secure makes cheerful joys of the tasks of universal training for military service. But he is a willing exile wherever there is money to be made. He cherishes a deep national pride: but he has no objection to servile occupation in a foreign land if it is profitable. Often he shows himself greedy and rapacious. Yet he is markedly hospitable and charitable. He is eager for liberty, but surrounds his life with a host of petty tyrannies of regulation, being more under the shadow of the official verboten than even the German. He loves the wild natural beauty of his mountains, but will spoil any Alp with a staring hotel and a funicular railway for the sake of tourist gold.

A nation of heroes and hotel-keepers, of patriots and mercenaries, a nation that produced the Swiss Guard which defended the Tuileries, and the suisse who will carry anybody's bag anywhere in Europe for a tip—the Swiss mingle in a curious way the sublime and the paltry.

Though Switzerland does not contain within its borders more than one-third of the Alps, and the greatest height of the Alpine range (Mount Blanc) is wholly within France, the Alps are always associated with Switzerland in the popular mind; and with good reason, for the country is particularly and almost wholly Alpine in its character, and

its national existence has been largely shaped by the mountain ranges which have given the people differing from one another in racial origin, in language, and in religion a bond of unity.

The most famous mountain range of the world historically, the Alps are far from being the greatest in height, and they are by no means the oldest of the world's mountains, though they are older probably than the Himalayas.

The form of a mountain range and its height give usually some surface indications of its age, old mountains having been usually smoothed down by erosion.

A mountain's first birthday is marked by a movement towards old age. As soon as it begins to live it begins to die. If it is of volcanic origin its term of life is usually short; it comes to being suddenly with a wild upheaval of the Earth, and at once the eating rain, and the splitting frost, and the destroying wind set to work to cut away its peak and pull it down to the level of the plain again. If the mountain is of more slow creation, the result of a gradual upwrinkling of a crease of the Earth as she readjusts her surface to the cooling of her bulk, the mountain may go on growing whilst also it goes on dying. From below inward forces are pushing it higher towards the sky. From above the rains and snows and winds are chiselling away its rocks and bearing them to the plains. In time the process of pushing up ceases; the process of grinding down goes on remorselessly, never pausing for a moment.

The European Alps are being subjected today to this inevitable process of softening of outline and lowering of height. But for many generations yet

they will lift white peaks to the skies. This though it is clear that the ice area upon them is steadily dwindling; a result, however, not of erosion, but of a warming of the climate of Europe, indeed of the whole northern hemisphere. The recession of the Swiss glaciers is due to this as have been those throughout Spitzbergen, Iceland, Central Asia, and Alaska. It is suggested that the cause is a present tendency towards equalisation of the earth's temperature, or that the Swiss glaciers, as well as the other great ice masses existing on the globe, are remnants of the last Ice Age, and are all doomed to disappear as the cycle works round for the full heat of the next Warm Age. But the disappearance, if it is to come, will not come quickly, and the doom of ice-climbing in Switzerland is too remote a threat to disturb the Alpinist.

To the inexpert a glacier is a glacier all the world over, but the expert knows that the glaciers of different mountains have the same variations of character as the streams of different countries. The Swiss Alpine glaciers have been described as of the medium type, lying as they do half-way between the Arctic and tropical extremes. They have not the rapid flow of the Arctic nor the dry rigidity of the tropical sort. Their walls are not silent as in the Central Andes, nor thundered over by continual avalanches like those of the upper Baltoro. They are of medium size also. In a single day almost any of them may be ascended from snout to snow-field, and descended again. To explore their remotest recesses no elaborately equipped

expedition is required. Yet they are large enough to be imposing, and penetrate deep enough into the heart of the hills to isolate their votaries completely from the world of human habitation. It is to this medium quality that the Alps owe much of their charm. This, too, it is that makes them an almost perfect mountain playground. Were they but a little smaller, how much they would lose that is most precious! Were they larger, how many persons that now can afford the cost and the strength to explore them would have to linger at their gates wistfully looking in. In area, too, they are large enough for grandeur and yet small enough for easy access. No part of them is beyond the range of a summer holiday, yet a commanding view of them is as apparently limitless as is the view from the greatest Asiatic peaks which, thus far, have been climbed. They are the only range of snow-mountains in the world thus blessed with moderation.

So firm a hold on the imagination has the sport of creeping over slippery ice-masses and fly-crawling along the face of precipices in pursuit of peaks, that the Swiss Alps do not always give sufficient scope for the energies of the mountain-climbers, though the beauties to be enjoyed are unsurpassed.

What is the chief charm of this mountain-climbing? The joy of the scenery? The exaltation of the keen high air? These are factors no doubt, but not essential nor even the chief factors. The chief appeal it makes is to the joy of combat and the pride of achievement.